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C O N F I D E N T I A L STOCKHOLM 000393

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TAGS: PREL PGOV SW

SUBJECT: SWEDEN: FOREIGN MINISTER FREIVALDS RESIGNS

REF: A. STOCKHOLM 198

¶B. 2005 STOCKHOLM 298

¶C. MARCH 8 CHRISTENSEN/MIDDLETON EMAIL

Classified By: Polcouns Casey Christensen, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (u) Prime Minister Goran Persson announced at a press conference March 21 the resignation of Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds. Persson named Deputy Prime Minister Bosse Ringholm as her "temporary" replacement. FM Freivalds had been scheduled to meet with Secretary Rice April 21. State Secretary Hans Dahlgren also submitted his resignation, but

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Ringholm has asked him to stay on.

¶12. (u) Freivalds said at the press conference "I feel that the current situation has become impossible for me. It is damaging to the government, to the party, and to the Foreign Ministry, and therefore I have chosen to resign."

¶13. (u) Internal MFA sources recently disclosed that Freivalds had, contrary to her earlier assertions, prior knowledge of her personal MFA political adviser Stefan Amer's contact with a web-hosting company that later shut down a web site that had published the Mohammed caricatures (ref A). This action had been challenged by diverse groups as a violation of constitutional guarantees of free speech. The site in question was the official site of the extreme-right-wing, anti-immigration party Sweden Democrats. Before Freivald's role was revealed, PM Persson had publicly criticized Amer's actions.

¶14. (c) Freivalds has been subject to persistent criticism for her handling of the tsunami crisis of December 2004 in which over 500 Swedes perished and thousands were affected (ref B). A governmental report on the crisis was particularly critical of Freivalds. The Swedish parliament (Riksdag) recently concluded hearings on the government's role in the tsunami crisis where again, Freivalds was sharply criticized. A possible vote of no-confidence against Freivalds was pending at the time of her resignation. Before the latest scandal, we had heard from an opposition member of parliament involved in the hearings that the vote of no-confidence would likely not succeed (ref C). Following these latest revelations, the Green Party, which supports Persson's government and would be the pivotal party for a vote of no-confidence, joined the opposition parties in calling for Freivalds' resignation. By dumping Freivalds, Persson has appeased the Greens and kept them as an ally -- an important consideration as the September 2006 parliamentary elections approach.

¶15. (c) By dismissing Freivalds at this juncture, Persson has sought to focus attention on the immediate scandal -- i.e., not telling the truth about her role in shutting down the web site -- while at the same time solving the conundrum of how to fire the unpopular Freivalds without responding to the demands from the tsunami critics for her ouster on that

account.

¶6. (c) Freivalds, removal occurs as Persson calibrates his team in the run-up to the September 2006 parliamentary elections, and attempts to put the tsunami scandal behind him. By all accounts, Ringholm is expected to be a place holder. MFA and other contacts -- including one of Ringholm's assistants -- tell us that Persson will likely name a non-temporary replacement within a matter of weeks. Names mentioned include Minister for Development Cooperation Carin Jamtin (generally deemed the front-runner), parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Urban Ahlin, and former Ambassador to the U.S. and current UNGA President Jan Eliasson.

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